seventh hour: fourth orbit

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by napkinthief

Summary

It's different. "Connor".

Bland.

Hank thought it had a stick up its ass before, but this is something else. Every morning it'll greet him in that annoying synthetic lilt, all placid smiles and canned platitudes. It's banned from the field, too, just so that Hank never gets a break from its scrawny silhouette in his periphery. Haunting the precinct like a plastic specter. Gone are the little smiles, the attitude he thought he'd caught glimpses of. No more weird-ass small talk. Figures it'd drop the human act now that the gig is up.

Still, it creeps him out. The way it'll look at him sometimes — wide brown eyes with nobody in the driver's seat. He's pretty sure it used to blink.

(The android revolution falls to a bullet. Hank returns to work to a familiar face.)

Notes

it may happen that you sit down to write down a handful of emo vignettes and then something entirely different comes to pass

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

“And you didn’t think to mention this *before* it waltzed up to me in the break room like the Ghost of Christmas fucking Past?”

Jeff’s poker face could put the PC-fuck-yous out in the hall to shame but his crossed arms make a rigid barrier and he keeps dodging Hank’s eyes. The long tendons in his neck bulge, taut.

“Hank-”

“Nuh-uh. Not this time.” The knuckles of his right hand ache something wicked. Hank flexes the fingers and latches onto the sting. “Give me one damn good reason not to walk out and put a bullet in its plastic skull right now.”

“Try two,” Jeff says, slow with the effort to keep his voice even. “They’d just send another and the damages would come out of your pocket. Hank, be reasonable.”

“Reasonable,” Hank echoes. “If I were reasonable I’d scrap that thing and take the gun to my own head next.” That last part kind of slips out, but it’s nothing Jeff didn’t know. “You saw what it did! There isn’t a fart’s worth about this bullshit that’s *reasonable* .”

“The decision came from higher up. They say the patch is airtight.”

Hank doesn’t deign that with a rude send-up.

“Right. Of course. I feel so much better.”

“If I’d brought it up,” Jeff grinds out, “would you have showed up at all?”

“And so what if I hadn’t? That’s supposed to be my call to make!”

“We need you here.”

Also, left to his own devices, Hank would’ve blown his brains out weeks ago. But Jeff is smart enough not to mention that. Hank works at a bit of chicken lodged in his molars with the tip of his tongue. Lifts his chin and contemplates the desk down the length of his nose.

“I could turn in my two weeks right now.”

Jeff’s scowl is titanium but Hank doesn’t miss the way his jaw clenches.

“I’m getting sick of your threats.”

“I already all but handed my badge over. The only reason I’m standing here is because everybody else hates Perkins too.”

“You were exonerated on the basis of a mental health crisis.”

“You appealed to the *insanity defense* ?”

“And I’ll do it again, but I admit I’d rather not. Are you going to attack more of your colleagues?”

“I might. I can think of a few good candidates.”

Jeff searches his face, and Hank imbues his glare with intent. Evidently, it's effective, because Jeff eases himself back in his chair. When he speaks, it's with the sort of measured candor Hank's come to associate with the handful of times he's called the guy with his phone in one hand, gun in the other.

“Do you *want* to quit?”

Hell yeah. Even if it weren't for the android, Hank kinda hates his job these days.

Well…

It's not so much the job as it is the station. The glass maze that makes him feel like a fat, old goldfish, there to be gawked at by nosy beat cops. The tar the break room coffee machine pisses out. The trigger-happy rookies, the belligerent veterans. Every second at work is a second he could be spending at the bar, or alone at home with a bottle of Jack.

Every second at work is a second he's not spending alone at home with a bottle of Jack.

Hank glances to the side but the tinted glass melts the bullpen into a mosaic of blurry splotches. Light and shadow. The chair squeals as he yanks it back, slumps in it heavily enough to elicit a dangerous creak, bends with his forearms braced on his knees. Jeff meets his eyes with a frown, a grid of deep furrows making a map of his forehead. Fuck, they’re getting old.

“I can’t come here and look at that face every day. I just can’t.”

Jeff inhales.

“I understand that you and the RK800 had-”

“You didn’t see it, Jeff,” Hank spits. More quietly, “I was *sure*. Yeah, half the time it was recycling the same fifteen canned CyberLife platitudes but sometimes it’d talk back to you or say or do something that didn’t make sense, or it might get this look, right. Like- like there was somebody home. I let it walk off because I thought those rebels might knock some sense into its head and the next thing I know it’s out there on TV, at the head of a goddamn army of androids and I thought- I was…”

Proud. He was fucking proud of that snake and just the thought makes him want to hurl, not least because the ghost of that warmth is still close enough to touch.

“I was sure,” he says again, and fucking shit, his eyes burn and Jeff’s face is going misty and the only good thing about that is that he can’t tell what kind of expression he’s making.

“It’s fucked up, right? The way shit went down? The world is fucked.” Surface tension is the only thing Hank’s got going for him right now so he drags his dead weight upright and starts for the door before that changes.

“But hey — just another Tuesday in paradise!”

Should’ve shut his mouth: the waver is impossible to miss now. Something in his chest winds and constricts until it’s strangling itself.

“Hank.”

“Bye, Jeff.”

“My door is open. If you need to talk.”

Hank pauses with the side of his fist on the cool glass. He doesn’t turn.

“You’re welcome to visit, too. Sue has been asking about you.”

Hank almost says something he’d have regretted later. Something so rank and spiteful that the venom of it startles him through the building hysteria. “Yeah,” he rasps instead, “Thanks,” and flees.

-

It’s different. ‘Connor’.

Bland.

Hank thought it had a stick up its ass before, but this is something else. Every morning it’ll greet him in that annoying synthetic lilt, all placid smiles and canned platitudes. It’s banned from the field, too, just so that Hank never gets a break from its scrawny silhouette in his periphery. Haunting the precinct like a plastic specter. Gone are the little smiles, the attitude he thought he’d caught glimpses of. No more weird-ass small talk. Figures it’d drop the human act now that the gig is up.

Still, it creeps him out. The way it’ll look at him sometimes — wide brown eyes with nobody in the driver’s seat. He’s pretty sure it used to blink.

“The fuck do you want?”

Its head tilts. Some basement-dwelling CyberLife asshole probably punched in the exact angle to induce the most disarming effect or something. It makes his stomach turn.

“Nothing, Lieutenant.”

“Then quit ogling and scram.”

“Yes, Lieutenant.”

And it’s gone. Hank gropes blindly for the mini bottle of DJ he’s had rattling around in his desk, uncorks, swigs it in one. Damn his shaking hands.

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“I just don’t fuckin’ get it,” Reed complains.

“Yep…”

“We all saw it. Shot its tin man comrade in the back and we’re supposed to, what, watch it parade around the office doing paperwork like a glorified scanner? As if anything about this is fucking normal?”

Hank pours a generous helping of Bailey’s into his coffee. One, two… the concoction laps at the rim of the paper cup. Yeah, that should do it.

“Tell me about it.”

“I mean, it’d be bad enough if it was just the same model but *no* , they send in the *same fucking unit* . Fucking unbelievable.”

Hank’s mini donut hovers forgotten, mid-path to his open mouth.

“The same unit?”

Reed goes quiet, stunned out of his rant. Then his eyebrows spasm like they aren't sure if they want to rise or scowl.

"Hold up." A laugh stutters out of him. "Don't tell me you *didn't know* ."

"How- no, shut up. I don't give a-"

"The serial number? Glowy white text right there on its fucking jacket? Oh man, Anderson…"

Hank pulls a swig. Stands to leave and punches Reed in the arm on his way out, hard, but that only serves to spur the goblin to a full-on cackle that chases him out of the break room.

"Shit! Some detective."

-

The first week almost did him in.

Would've gone all the way, too, if he'd had two sober brain cells to rub together. The days smear into one in his head. Hank would wake up — on the couch, on the floor, bed was lucky — atone for the previous night's misdeeds, grant himself the scant relief of a couple of Ibuprofen and chase it down with a nice early start to quell the shakes. Feed Sumo, let him do his business in the backyard. Takeout for lunch if he could be assed to order. Plain toast and leftovers if not. Most days started fraying at the edges by three, and by five he'd be comfortably soaked. He'd play, and he'd pass out. Repeat.

Really, it's not so much what he did as what he didn't. What he didn't do was *think*. About Connor. About what went down outside the closed ecosystem he'd made of his house. He'd meld into the couch and watch ancient reruns of The Real Housewives and those Christmas

Hallmark movies they air earlier every fucking year with twenty minute ad breaks. Anything but the news.

Hank's life has been defined by negative space for a long time. The choreographies he composes to fill every conscious hour with white noise are intricate, and he's got the moves down to an art. Can hear a thought coming a mile away. The secret is to catch it unawares — you spot its stench on the wind, you sneak up on that sucker and *bam*! 2020 Denise Richards ragamuffin controversy. A guy just doesn't take one of those beasts head-on until he's seven beers in.

That's probably why it took him nine days to notice his revolver was unloaded, the single bullet gone. In another timeline he might've been drawn in by the mystery. Short of sprouting legs and running off, there was nowhere that thing could've gone but his skull. He still hasn't figured out what happened to it.

On the eleventh day, Jeff got sick of having his calls ignored and showed up at his door with a Tupperware of pasta carbonara. Hank told him to fuck off. Jeff strong-armed him out of the doorway and the absolute state of his house knocked enough self-awareness into him to at least act ashamed. It's amazing how quickly an already neglected living space will cross the ephemeral line between 'grimy' and 'pigsty' and tumble right on over to 'sad'.

Jeff took one look at the legion of plastic bottles circling the kitchen table like a shitty summoning ring, set the pasta down and informed Hank his suspension was over, effective immediately. Hank told him he was pretty damn comfortable enjoying retirement, actually, and Jeff told him there was a puke stain on his shirt.

Hank took a shower that day. And the day after that, he reached for the closet for the first time in nearly two weeks instead of the same rank hoodie, and he put his goddamn outside clothes on and he went to work. It sucked ass. Reed needled him and the beat cops whispered to each other and Miller gave him a clap on the back, and when he got home he drank until he passed out.

When he woke up the next morning, starfishing on the couch, it didn't feel quite as much like opening his eyes to the lid of a sealed coffin.

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The android reaches a sort of celebrity status at the station. An object of wary curiosity, intense suspicion and, at times, open contempt. It's not like Hank doesn't get it. He wouldn't mind an opportunity to blow off some steam himself, it's just… distracting. You've got to have something wrong with you not to have some kind of gut reaction to those gasps and winces. Even if it's just faking it for budget reasons.

Besides, he swears some of those pricks have a bet going, the way they're always doing it where he can see. Some kind of game to see who can get a rise out of him. Jeff tells him it's paranoia but promises to look into it, and Hank feels bad for putting more work on his plate. The guy has more important things to worry about than Hank's feelings.

The first time it happens, it's just a couple of rookies daring each other to approach. It turns into a round of green-light-red-light, the kids freezing and sharing wide-eyed glances when it turns to look at them. Eventually one gets close enough to touch, pokes at it, and the rest wait in restless anticipation. The 'Can I help you?' they're awarded with for their efforts disappoints them to scattering.

Over time, they get braver. Then they get bold. Violent. Hank ignores it because so does everyone else except Miller, whose bleeding heart is in the wrong place. It's not their business if a declawed murder bot gets its comeuppance in the form of workplace bullying.

That's why Hank doesn't even need to make the decision not to intervene when a pair of beat cops whose names he might remember if he cared to try meander across the bullpen, coming to a halt a cautious five feet from the android's desk. In fact, Hank's not even paying attention — he's busy. He clicks a document open at random and taps out his name in the top field.

"Hey, RK800," one says, a generic cop if Hank ever saw one. Thinning hair, holds himself like a middle school bully. A blurry anchor tattooed at the base of his left thumb that screams bachelor party blunder.

"Good morning, officer Maddox," the android acknowledges politely. "Can I help you?"

Maddox. That's right. Maddox exchanges an uneasy look with his buddy, a tall woman with the look of somebody itching to bolt.

"You pull me up in some database or something? I thought they'd cracked down on CyberLife about the privacy shit."

"I didn't need to. Your name is embroidered on your uniform."

The girls snorts. Maddox chuckles through his teeth. "Right. 'Course." He braces up, closing in on the desk to circle the android like a prematurely balding great white.

"So, um… What're you up to?"

Hank clicks to edit the next field. Date.

"I'm rearranging the case file management system. While most of the more recent material is sorted and archived by virtual AI, the older files were handled by humans and are prone to misplacement or incomplete information…and the AI tends to miss nuance."

"Damn," Maddox drawls. "Thank God we have you to fix that mess. They're not sending you to the field, then?"

"Not for the time being," it confirms with a corporate-approved air of regret. "The American Androids Act is in the process of being reworked, much of it from scratch. I expect that special cases such as my own series won't be at the top of their agenda."

Maddox fingers his badge. "Series? There's more of you guys?"

"At the moment, I am the only active RK800."

“What happened to the one who shot the deviant ringleader? They scrap it?”

“No. I am the model in question — #313 248 317 -52. While I experienced some minor software instability that may have created the illusion of deviant behavior, special countermeasures were utilized to ensure my actions never strayed from the interests of CyberLife and its associates. After the patch, I was deemed more than stable enough to function within the parameters of temporary legislation.”

Maddox nods along, eyebrows climbing higher the longer it prattles on. Then he coughs up an incredulous laugh, whirls to his buddy with a grin. “Dude, I told you!” The girl looks vaguely queasy. “CyberLife’s rabid bloodhound is doing paperwork… Fuck. I can’t wait to tell Tessa. She’s gonna lose it.”

“Is this a fucking joke to you?” his friend hisses. “I know you weren’t there but remember what I told you? About the Phillips penthouse? First field test and it grabs Deckart’s gun from next to his cooling body, doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t ask anybody. And they considered that a success!” She steals a perturbed glance at the android, who tilts its head in a perfect impression of guileless curiosity. She lowers her voice, as if that makes a difference. The thing’s probably got thought-reading software.

“You can’t trust a word out of their mouth… Hell, that android could be a literal time bomb and they wouldn’t give a shit as long as it’s feeding them intel!”

“I know, I’m not an idiot! But you’ve gotta admit that it’s kinda funny… I mean, file management?”

“Officer Maddox, officer Hernandez,” the android interrupts. Hernandez… Hank knew that. “If there’s nothing else…”

The two go quiet. Maddox licks his lips.

“Actually… There is one thing.”

“I’m at your service.”

By now, they’re attracting looks. Hernandez eyes the office.

“Neil, let’s just go…”

“Get me a coffee,” Maddox orders with something like subdued glee. “No milk, two sugars.”

Should’ve known these clowns were Reed’s friends. Hank can feel Miller’s eyes on him, waiting for him to look up to catch his attention. He’s going to be disappointed. Hank pastes an image file into its designated slot.

“Right away, officer.”

It strides off. Maddox gives Hernandez a triumphant look, but the girl is busy frowning at her phone. The android returns, bearing a paper cup. Maddox accepts, takes a long sip. He looks the android up and down. Then he reaches up to balance the cup on its head.

“New assignment, RK800: Under no circumstances are you allowed to let that cup spill. This is a very important mission and I expect you to treat it accordingly. Don’t let me down.”

The android’s jaw twitches like it wants to tilt its head but catches itself just in time. Hank closes the file without saving.

“Officer Maddox… I fail to see the purpose of this exercise.”

Maddox chews his lip. “Huh, what- what’s happening right now? It’s almost like you’re questioning my orders…” He turns to his partner, brow crinkling with mock concern. “What do you think, Viv? Does RK here seem deviant to you?”

Hernandez has had enough. She's nicer than him — Hank would've walked away at 'hello'.

"Look, we were supposed to be on patrol five minutes ago. I'll be in the car. If you're not there in ten I'm leaving."

Then again, he doesn't hang out with Maddox. Maybe there's a reason he forgot these guys' names.

Maddox waves his hand. "Buzzkill. See you, I guess." She spares him a curse before striding off.

"May I continue my work?"

Half the bullpen isn't even pretending to be working anymore. Somebody mutters, followed by quiet laughter. Maddox glances at his audience, at the corner behind which Hernandez disappeared. Shifts in discomfort before facing the android.

"Yeah, yeah… Just do one more thing for me."

"Of course."

"Drop and give me twenty."

The android nods. Crouches, braces its hands on the floor and balances its weight there to kick its legs back. Maddox looms over it like a drill sergeant. Twenty push-ups; perfect form, deep enough for its tie to graze the floor. The cup doesn't budge. It stands smoothly, not a hair out of place.

"Was that satisfactory?"

Somebody who didn't know better might call its tone sardonic. Maddox squirms with irritation. He gives the android a shove, visibly bristling at its poised backstep. Hank moves a shortcut icon on his terminal to finish a crude dick shape.

"Good enough," Maddox forces out after a beat too long. "Next, do a handstand."

"Very well." It takes the cup and moves to deposit it on the desk.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

It inclines its head, blinks. "A handstand."

"You- I told you not to let the cup fall!"

"No… My instructions were to: 'not let that cup spill', specifically 'under any circumstances'. Moving the cup to carry out another order does not constitute spilling."

Maddox goes red.

"There's no way…" He expels a breath. "Fine. Consider this an amendment: Don't let the cup spill and don't let it fall off your head. No holding it steady, nothing."

The android places the cup back on its head.

"Now the handstand."

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that at the moment as it conflicts with your previous instructions."

“Since when do you get to decide which orders are worth the effort? Give it a fucking go!”

“My advanced preconstruction software allows me to predict outcomes with a negligible margin of error and choose my actions accordingly,” the android explains mildly. “I would go so far as to say that such software isn’t necessary to accurately evaluate this particular situation.”

“You’re talking back to me.”

Maddex turns on his heel, gesticulating at the android to the audible amusement of his audience. “Are you seeing this? It’s fucking talking back to me!”

“Show it who’s boss, big man!”

“*You* do a handstand, Maddox!”

“Hey, RK800!” Person calls. “What’s Maddox going to do now that he didn’t get his fun? Give me the numbers!”

“Officer Maddox is frustrated,” the android muses. Detective, indeed. “He is professionally unfulfilled, impulsive, with a history of domestic violence.” Maddox gapes at it. “In seventeen percent of outcomes, Officer Maddox withdraws in order to preserve his image. Twenty-four percent of outcomes involve him issuing a different order. Six percent of outcomes comprises a number of unlikely scenarios, but the leading prediction at fifty-three percent is an escalation to physical-”

Maddox grabs it by the throat and slams it into the wall. The cup goes a-toppling. Coffee everywhere. Hank grabs his flask, his coat, and heads for the exit.

-

One black and hail-slick Thursday night, Hank steals it.

It’s not some kind of heist, or any kind of premeditated operation, really. The snowfall has made him antsy; a shapeless energy that builds in him, spurs him to pace the bullpen like a caged grizzly, nudging the precipice back one swig at a time.

So by the time his shift crawls to an end, he’s a good ways into the quicksand limbo between ‘tipsy’ and ‘smashed’, and a lot of random impulses sober Hank would dismiss as brain farts suddenly seem viable. Sober Hank is miserable, so who cares what he thinks.

(Drunk Hank is also miserable, but at least he can look out the window without wanting to hurl.)

One such impulse prompts him to diverge from his path to the door, across the bullpen to a barren desk where the android stares into the middle-distance with its weird, skinless hand resting on the terminal. It’s not even pretending to breathe. Nondescript file icons fly across the screen.

“Come on. We're leaving.”

The android jolts. Its hand falls away, the white plastic retreating as it looks up at him.

“Lieutenant…” it says carefully. “I’m not approved for field work.”

“What, really? I thought you'd just fallen madly in love with the printer.”

It looks away, light a solid yellow as if Hank’s stab at humor shorted out its systems. He scoffs, unsure what he was expecting.

“I said come on, so come on. We’re not gonna work.”

He turns to leave. Behind him, the soft scrape of the chair moving.

“Where are we going?”

Hank starts for the exit, not looking back to see if his shadow follows. He knows it will. It has no choice.

“You tell me, detective.”

That shuts it up.

Some of the overtime try-hards and night shift folks, vaguely familiar faces, cast curious glances at their little procession, but nobody speaks up. It trails him down the hall, out the back door, across the icy parking lot like a timid dog. It isn’t until they’re both in the car and Hank yanks the driver’s side door shut that it opens its mouth.

“I’m no longer a detective.”

“Huh?”

It eases its own door closed with barely more than a thud. Yellow soaks the headliner.

“Technically, I was never accredited.”

“That so?”

“Androids cannot hold occupational titles.”

“Figures.”

Hank digs out his keys. Turns the ignition. Cars started going wrong the moment fobs became those featureless little chunks of plastic.

“Lieutenant,” it says quietly as he backs out of the lot. “I’m obligated to inform you that your blood alcohol content exceeds the-”

“Shut the fuck up,” says Hank.

And it does, because it has no choice.

At least the snowfall has let up a bit. Still, the city is an ice rink encased in slush and rime, wheel-grooves polished a treacherous black that you might mistake for dry tarmac until you try to brake. Christmas is coming up and every boulevard and shopping center facade glows incandescent with ornaments; a star the size of Sumo winks overhead; the park is aflame with a thousand tiny studs. The streets glisten. Hank makes the mistake of glancing at the android — it gazes out the window, lights swiping across its vacant face. Its own mood ring pulses blue-yellow-blue in tandem. Hank puts his music on and cranks up the volume until he can’t hear his thoughts.

His brain catches up with him as they roll to a skewed stop by the front door. The android peers at the house; the snow-topped stairs, the dark window. Hank wrangles himself out and turns to see it hasn’t even unbuckled.

“Well,” he grumbles, awkward and a little mad at himself. “Get out. I’m freezing my balls off.”

“Why are we here, Lieutenant?”

Why is it here?

“You’re just full of questions today, huh?”

It doesn’t have a canned response for that. It gets out of the car and follows him to the door and inside. Hank shoulders out of his coat, bats blindly at the wall until light floods the foyer. Then Sumo is there, panting and bounding at both of them with his gross tongue flopping. Hank ruffles his neck. Traitorous animal hasn’t been this excited to see him in years. The android hangs back, wide-eyed.

“Thought you guys were buddies,” Hank mutters and makes for the kitchen. There’s two-thirds of a bottle of Black Lamb waiting for him, right there on the table like a faithful lover. He takes a swig and watches from the corner of his eye as Sumo presses his wet muzzle into the android’s palm. It brings the hand atop his head and runs it across stiffly. Couldn’t even program it to pet a dog right. Sumo doesn’t seem to mind, his tail drumming a happy thump-thump-thump against the wall. Hank takes a longer swig and heads to the bedroom.

He gets comfortable, tries to be gross and shameless the way a man ought to alone in his own home. Grabs a drink, turns on the TV and surfs to a basketball game between teams he doesn’t care about, slumps on the couch in his smelly hoodie and sweats. Doesn’t look at the android.

There’s a ceramic clink in the kitchen. Hank cranes over the back of the couch. The android freezes on its way to the sink, a stack of plates in its hands.

“What’re you doing?”

It looks down at the plates, then back at Hank, as if to say he could’ve figured this one out himself.

“Cleaning, Lieutenant.”

Hank has half a mind to tell it to cut it out. Then his eyes slide to the kitchen table, mostly empty of the cityscape of cups and bottles and takeout containers that usually obstructs his view out the (new, unbroken) window. An open plastic bag sits propped up against a cabinet.

"Huh…"

What's even the point of holding onto that old dogma? His sense of dignity? Self-respect? Yeah, right. If it's some event horizon he's worried about, that line was crossed in tandem with the threshold when he dragged a corporate assassin home with him. Hank turns back to the TV.

Now that he's paying attention, he can make out the quiet sounds of it moving around. The clink of cutlery, the water running. The slide of paper. Plastic crinkling. If he's not looking, as long as his front brain is focused on the TV, it's almost like there's somebody else in the house.

Some twenty minutes pass. Hank's comfortably sloshed, and the edges of his vision melt to a soft haze. Erika Jayne sways on the screen like a leopard-patterned mirage.

"Do I have your permission to exit the house?"

The android stands in the doorway, holding three bulging plastic bags sealed with neat knots.

"Go nuts."

It nods and Hank turns away. The sound of the door. The interviews reach him in bits and pieces and then the episode ends and Hank can't be bothered to switch to the next one. There's the door again, cutting the quiet.

"Come- c'mover here," he says on impulse, which at the moment translates directly to action. The android walks over to stand in front of him. Hank squints at it, up and down.

“I liked you better, before. Even if it was all fake.”

The android tilts its head.

“Now you’re just…” Hank gestures at all of it.

“Is there something I could do to help you like me again?”

“Exactly…” he mutters darkly around the mouth of his bottle. “Now you’re like that.”

“Is there anything else you’d like me to do, Lieutenant?”

“Yeah. Quit pacing."

What the hell. He’s got an android maid now, apparently. His pride isn’t coming back — might as well go all the way.

“Fuck it... Sumo hasn’t gone on a real walk in ages. Leash is in the coat rack. Don’t go too far, though. He’s not as young as he used to be.”

The android yellow lights away. Probably downloading dog info.

“Very well, Lieutenant.”

Hank grunts. Settles back to stare at the frozen thumbnail on the screen. Listens to quiet footfalls, the tap and scuttle of claws.

“Let’s go, Sumo.” Sumo panting. Closer: “See you soon, Lieutenant. We’ll be back in sixteen to twenty minutes, depending on Sumo’s level of fitness and average pace.”

“Whatever. Just don’t get hit by a car.”

“We won’t.”

The door opens, shuts. The quiet hums. Hank hits play and turns the volume up. Time warps and stumbles.

Hank stirs to the sound of the door. His head buzzes something fierce and his limbs are warm and leaden, and the noises in the foyer are familiar. He slips in and out of awareness between footsteps, the shake-off shudder of wet fur. A quiet admonishment. The dry pour of kibble.

“Lieutenant Anderson?”

Hank cracks his eyes open. A blurry face swims in his field of view; brown eyes, brown hair. A freckle, right there. He knows that one. Made note of it the first time he saw him — it was such an oddity. The knowledge that somebody put it there.

“Connor?”

“Lieutenant… You shouldn’t sleep here. You’ll damage your back.”

“I’ll sleep’ere I wanna…” Hank tells him and rolls over.

“I’m afraid I have to insist.”

A hand on his shoulder. Hank tries to bat it away but then he's being hoisted up with startling strength, the warmth of the couch stolen from him.

"Lemme go..!"

"You'll feel better in the morning this way."

The hand hooks under Hank's arm and they're moving. The floor lurches nauseatingly, but he persists. Then he's falling back and there's the squeak of springs. Fabric, soft and cool. The ceiling above spins.

"Urg…"

"Are you going to throw up?"

Hank considers this. "Naw…"

"Alright."

A moment passes where it's just Hank and the buzz. He closes his eyes. The footsteps return. A clink; glass on wood.

"There's water on the nightstand. Alcohol is a diuretic. Please drink if you can."

Hank makes some sort of sound. The footsteps start, then pause. The silence prompts him to look. Connor stands in the doorway, haloed by the distant glow of the foyer.

"Thank you," he says inexplicably.

Hank blinks at him as the room somersaults.

“Y’re welcome?”

He nods once, exits. Eases the door closed but not all of the way, and light cuts a sliver of soft orange in the world. Hank stares at it and soon after, everything fades.

Come morning, he wakes to a potent dog-smell and a faceful of slobber. No android. The bottles that gathered dust under the coffee table are nowhere to be seen, as is the ecosystem of mold that dominated the kitchen table for the better part of the month. The plates make a neat, white row in the cupboard. This time, it’ll take him thirteen days to notice the bullet is gone.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Twice is coincidence, thrice is a pattern. Hank refuses to think of it as a habit.

It’s just that, some days he’s stopping by the liquor store on his way home and takes the turn back to the station instead. Sure, the guys talk, but nobody ever questions him. Hank does his best not to question himself. As long as he doesn’t think about what he’s doing, the motions make sense. As long as he doesn’t talk to it. Not until coherence is a glimmer in the rear view and anything that might find its way out of his mouth will be just a sour aftertaste by the morning.

It’s just as well. Not like the android can judge. It pisses him off sometimes, the way it goes along with every order with nary a blink. Gathers empty bottles and drifts through dim rooms like that’s what it was built for while Hank pretends to ignore it. The whole setup would be weird and pretty awkward if they were two human beings with souls and situational awareness and feelings to hurt. As it happens, it's just weird and pathetic instead. Maybe he's punishing himself.

Look at that — another ‘.18 and up’ kinda thought. Self-awareness and sobriety don’t mix.

“Hey, Anderson. Word is you’ve been taking the android home with you.”

Hank closes the rest of the distance to his desk without giving Reed the gratification of a reaction. He knew this was coming. Told himself he didn’t give a shit, but that doesn’t stop his face from heating.

“Shouldn’t believe everything you hear,” he mutters, pulling up to the terminal. The wheels of his chair squeak in ridicule. Reed tips back his own and Hank pictures heading over to shove him the rest of the way.

“Relax, I’m not a fucking snitch. Just, uh- never thought I'd see you go for a plastic. Those old johns who kept the robot whorehouses running, even a lot of them have quit. I guess it’s cute enough in a nerdy Barbie sort of way, but, you know…”

It’s late afternoon and Hank’s at a muddled point of tipsy where his brain takes its time chewing that, which is probably why Reed gets to trail off all smug with his teeth intact. The disbelief settles into disgust, then a sick sort of burn in a spot between his ribs. Or maybe that’s acid reflux. A heart attack, if he’s lucky, which he never is.

He chases it down with some St. Remy and turns, slow, to face Reed’s crooked smirk.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Just leave him alone, Gavin…”

Miller. Bless his heart, but the guy might as well have fanned a puff of air at a grease fire. Reed ignores him and spreads his arms in mock surrender.

“Wouldn’t let it out of my line of sight, that’s all I’m saying. It’s a matter of time. You get used to it, one day you turn your back and maybe you left a pair of scissors on the table and all of a sudden it starts feeling crafty. Hell, if it’s smart it’ll strike when you’re in a, uh, *compromising* position-”

“You’re sick, Reed. Get the fuck outta my sight.” Then, because he might as well commit and Reed deserves it, “Actually, do me one better: go take a bath with a toaster.”

Reed cants his head.

“I dunno…” The smirk splits open to an ugly grin. “Seems like you and tin can have already got that covered.”

Hank should've seen that coming. But then, Reed should've seen his fist, so it all evens out.

-

Hank is at the bar when he gets a call.

This is notable because he doesn't get calls. Certainly not social ones, and even whatever shady databases telemarketers scrape for victims seem to have blacklisted him, or at least he can't remember the last time some destitute lit major tried to peddle him 7G or whatever.

Oh, that's right. Hank scowls down at the screen, but the numbers don't stir up any sense of recognition. He started rejecting every unknown caller when they swapped the human wage slaves out for robots. It just so happens that the two drinks he's bought so far and one extra on the house have made him charitable, because he takes a sip for luck and hits accept.

"Anderson, and I'm not interested in your integrative yoga course, so-"

"No, listen, don't hang up!"

He doesn't place the voice right away. Then, "...Chen?"

The scrape of breathing, harsh over the speaker. Hank finds himself sitting up a little straighter.

"It's… It's the android. We need your help over here."

"Over here *where* ? What about the android?"

He doesn't need to ask which.

“Shooting range. Lewis hit it by accident and it cut the power. Exits are jammed. We- It’s not doing anything but we can’t get out.”

The pieces are barely enough to map out the edge of an ugly puzzle. More than enough to evoke the stench of something burning; something Hank won’t get to ignore. Luckily, the previous three neat whiskeys dull the sense of foreboding to a looming shadow in the haze. He drains the fourth to keep it at bay a while longer. Maybe he’s about to be driving, fast, but he trusts his gut and right now it’s telling him he’s going to need extra padding for whatever the fuck the night is shaping up to be.

“Je-heezus. You’re damn lucky I’m drunk.”

“You’re always drunk, Anderson. Please, just-”

A voice in the background cuts her off, muffled and tinny. Hank can’t make out the words but it’s easy enough to put a name on that maddening small dog bowwow. Then, impact on the microphone and Hank jerks back as the audio blows out. There’s a crackle, the sharp back-and-forth of a brief argument.

“Your plastic pet’s snapped, Anderson,” Reed hisses. *“It’s toying with us, biding its time, I can tell, so get your ass over here before-”*

Hank hangs up and stuffs the phone into his jeans.

“Wow, Hank,” Jimmy marvels as he shrugs on his coat. “You got a missus or something?”

“Yeah, when Hell freezes over,” he mutters and heads for the door. The night air hits like a slap and the spectral lights of the city swim swaying laps around him like deep sea fish.

-

Slipping by the night crew unnoticed is easy, given the way the building is pitch black and the few people present wander the halls with their phone flashlights aloft like stupid slasher protagonists or huddle around portable LED lanterns to mutter worriedly. It's funny, the way people instinctively get quiet in the dark.

The whole thing is getting a little too real by the time Hank (carefully) trots the stairs down to the shooting range and the double sliding doors are, indeed, locked. The handprint scanner on the wall pulses a slow, dim red; ERROR — NO POWER, the screen proclaims.

Hank shoves his flashlight between his teeth and fishes out his key ring. Identifying the master key is a process of elimination: house, garage, a random rusty one that might fit a bike lock he hasn't touched in years. Car. A sleek tiny one his mind tends to kind of ignore because he's never needed it. It's a goddamn miracle he still has the thing.

Then again, maybe not. Hank's been saying it forever — every machine will conk out, and they don't even have the decency to be predictable about it. His laptop might as well be a black box with its sleek chrome shell and a billion different points for a zero or a one to go crooked. You never need to guess with an honest to God deadbolt.

The doors click and hiss. Hank slots his fingers in the groove above the lock and pulls.

It's a little hard to tell what's going on inside, what with the swarm of lights that throw multiples of trembling shadows across every surface. The languid tilt of the world doesn't help.

A cluster of people have barricaded themselves behind the elbow-height partition between the range and the control booth, agitated voices waning at his entrance. When his eyes do latch onto a colorful anchor point in the flurry of light and shadow, Hank nearly loses his efforts at the bar all over the scuffed tile.

"Ugh, fuck…"

Most of the walled sections are empty, the red bullseyes of cardboard targets keeping watch in the shade. All but one. Cans litter the firing lean and the floor underneath. Another shaky flashlight beam sweeps by a lane near the furthermost wall and there; a body crumpled with its back to the target. Blue all over its crisp, white button-up, the hand clasping the side of its throat.

At first, Hank thinks it's already dead. Then he points his own flashlight and it meets his eyes across the room. The hairs at the back of his neck stand on end. It's the cold, in all likelihood; the concrete walls seeping underground chill. He lets his arm fall. A tiny red dot burns in the dark.

"You made it. Thank fuck."

Hank turns to Chen approaching. She makes a wobbly path — drunk, and holding it worse than him.

"It was crazy!" she huffs, eyes flicking to the range. "We've been stuck down here for twenty minutes, just waiting for it to do something. Great timing, by the way — Wilkins would've pissed his pants any minute. Gavin thought you might've hit a street light."

"Yeah, you're welcome," he mumbles. Chen punches his arm amicably and makes for the door, followed by the rest of Gavin's goons bearing cans and bottles like trick-or-treaters. He earns a few floorward thank-yous, a nod or two. At the scowl in return, they scuttle off. Maddox, his face dough-pale, gives him a wide berth.

"The big man's here!" Reed hollers by way of greeting. His breath smells like cheap beer.

"Yeah, and now I'm leaving. Right after you tell me what the fuck you monkeys were doing in here."

Reed's tongue flicks past his lips. He sways slightly. "None of your business."

“Next time you’re locked up in a Saw trap I’m gonna put my phone on silent and finish my damn drink in peace.”

“Look, it’s- we made a bad call, okay? We were having a drink down the street, thought we’d cap off the night here. Have a little fun.”

Hank makes a show of letting his eyes sweep the dark. Avoids the far wall.

“Yeah. Looked like a mighty good time.”

“The point was to *avoid* hitting it! *Lewis* -”

“Gavin? You coming?”

Chen hovers in the doorway. Reed, his fuming interrupted, takes a few seconds to shift gears.

“Yeah, just gotta, uh… clean up here. Get your ass home.”

“You sure you don’t need any help?”

“Fuck off, Tina.”

She gives him the finger and does.

Hank watches her go. “‘Clean up’, huh.”

Reed flashes him a lopsided smirk — barely a twitch of his mouth. The guy radiates nervous energy, shuffling in place, teeth worrying at his lower lip. He turns on his heel and strides towards the narrow passageway by the wall.

Hank should walk away right now. Shoot Jeff a message and drink the rest of the night away.

Reed's flashlight floods the mess. The android's legs pull to its chest as it blinks in the glare. Hank's feet defy every instinct firing up in his brain and then he's halfway down the lane, boots falling heavy on the polished finish.

This close, the damage paints a simple story. Blue blood seeps between the fingers at its throat, trickling a sluggish path down its wrist before disappearing into a sleeve. No blood on the wall — the bullet is still in there. Its face is open, calm.

Reed towers over the android, hands on his hips. Probably milking the moment for all it's worth — everybody knows it pisses him off to look up at it.

"You hacked the system, right? The station's network, or whatever?"

The android opens its mouth and fresh rivulets rush down the tracks across its chin. It bends over to cough quietly. The wet splatter has Hank hiding a gag behind his knuckles. When it speaks, though, there's none of the gurgle you'd expect from a human with their throat clogged with blood — just the faint buzz of static. The occasional glitchy hiccup.

"I didn't- th e power outage- The facility does encompass a type of nexus, but… hardware controls and locally stored data can't all be accessed from a centralized-"

Reed throws his arms down with a growl.

"Can you wipe the cameras or not?"

“Yes.”

“Then get wipin’ before I blow your head off.”

“That,” it says quietly, “would go against my programming.”

“You’re supposed to do what I say, so *do what I fucking say*!”

Hank needs to walk away. He shouldn’t have come at all.

“I’m sorry, but you don’t have the administrative rights to override certain security directives.”

Reed advances on it, and for a second it looks like he’s rearing up for a kick. Then he turns on his heel, spits a curse.

His head whips up.

“Anderson.”

Hank’s shaking his head before Reed gets the chance to spell it out for him.

“Yeah, no can do. You’re on your own.”

Reed prowls right up into his personal space. Hank frowns at his rat face, unimpressed. This trick wouldn’t work even if he were thirty years younger and two feet shorter.

“I know you’ve drowned half your brain cells in booze so I’ll give you a couple hints. Yeah, the power is out, but the cameras have backup power sources.”

“Maybe you figured this all out recently but I know how security cameras work, Reed.”

“Then you also get what it looks like when you show up in the middle of the night, sneak down here and don’t come out. Maybe you’re a little late to the party, sure, but you look as guilty as any of us.”

Hank frowns.

“No I fuckin’ don’t. Lewis shot the thing on camera. I haven’t done anything.”

“You think we were fucked up enough to do this shit on live CCTV?”

Hold up. Hank’s eyes search the ceiling, but the only red light in the vicinity blinks at their feet.

“The tilt in my chair’s been broken for like two years. No way you’re surprised they’re cheaping out on security.”

The android’s head hangs. Its eyes are closed.

“I’ll just tell ‘em.”

“Your words against ours.”

Hank’s head bobs, slow. He feels his lips pull back. It’s as much a smile as most animals showing their teeth. A gravelly laugh strains out of him.

“Are you- Reed, are you fucking threatening me?”

The prick shrugs. The flashlight tucked under his crossed arm casts deep shadows in the hollows of his eyes.

“I’m just saying. There’s six of us and the only reason you’re still around is because of Fowler’s savior complex. There’s only so long he can keep making excuses for you before it’s his job on the line. Make of that what you will.”

Hank shakes his head. He turns around to breathe at the darkness. Anything to get this germ out of his line of sight or he might do something Reed would regret. Completes the circle to glare.

“Yeah,” Reed smirks. “That’s what I thought.”

He steps out the way, jerks his head at the android when Hank doesn’t move right away. With one last squint he hopes conveys the depth of his loathing, Hank shuffles over.

“Hey, Connor. Uh…”

Fuck. He thought his brain had let go of the name. The android lifts its face, sluggish. Hank swallows bile. “Wipe the cameras. Lieutenant’s orders.”

Red-yellow-yellow. A part of him wants to be told to fuck off.

“Could you specify the time frame you would like to delete?”

Reed’s on it before Hank has the chance to work his mouth open.

“First of all, kill the feed. Then get rid of the footage starting at fifteen minutes before you got out of stasis until now.”

“What he said,” Hank mutters.

Its eyelids flutter, mood ring party-lighting before settling back on pulsing red. The glitching stops but it doesn’t look back up.

“Done?” Reed demands.

“Yes.”

“Okay. Okay… *fuck*. Fucking Lewis- hold up.” He goes still. One foot launches into a rapid tap. “That memory transfer shit- when’s the last time you fucking, updated, or whatever?”

“The uploads are daily. I performed one before entering stasis earlier tonight.”

“You saying you haven’t sent them anything since?”

“I haven’t.”

Yes, Reed mouths.

“The damage I’ve sustained isn't critical enough to warrant an emergency upload. Without repairs, I’ll last another seventy-two minutes.”

The tail of its explanation nearly drowns in static. The worst of Reed's twitchy motion ebbs.

"So it's all just in your brain right now?"

"Ĩn̥̈ a̋ sḛ̆n̈s̈e̊̃."

Reed scratches at his thumb. The nail bed is raw, jagged scar tissue.

"And, uh, about where in your head is it? Your CPU, hard drive, that shit."

Its lips part and something passes over its expression. Hank is sure because Reed sees it too, jerks to step back as his hand flies to the holster in his belt. It's gone in an instant — a mirage. The eyes on Reed are unblinking, vacant. It brings its hand to its face. Presses its index finger in a spot between its eyebrows and a little ways up.

"Yeah, I figured that was it," Reed mumbles, almost softly. He pulls out the gun. The android's arm drops, limp.

Hank has half a mind to step in.

Reed stalks over until he hovers by the android. Its eyes find Hank's, and in that moment he's frozen. Reed aims. Fires. Its head lolls. Blue blood trails the side of its nose, gathers between its lips, slips down its chin. Reed grimaces at the mess on the wall behind it.

"Gross as fuck."

He holsters his gun. Turns to Hank and strolls up to clap him on the arm.

“I owe you one, Anderson. Not gonna lie, I was worried for a second there. Good thing plastic’s imprinted on you.”

“You’re insane, Reed.”

Reed barks a laugh, waves an arm on his way out. No, Hank wants to tell him; he doesn’t get to do that. He doesn’t get to be *friendly* . Reed’s insane and Hank won’t do good-natured banter with him and the day he does is the day he puts a bullet in his own damn brain because they’re nothing alike. The words tangle and wedge in his mouth and by the time he has a sentence together Gavin is gone and Hank is alone in an empty hall with a corpse he might as well have put there.

-

By some miracle, Hank makes it to work the next morning. Day. Whatever. Time isn’t real. Mostly it’s to escape his half-digested dinner of chips and vodka making an island of his coffee table.

The next-day delivery was probably just for the duration of the investigation, right? There’s no reason for them to be pumping the things out lightning-speed just to have them printing forms by eight. He leaves Sumo dozing on the couch with an empty pizza box and makes his trudging way to the car, cautiously optimistic.

Of course that means he catches sight of it the second he rounds the hallway to the bullpen. It’s waiting by his desk the way it used to, before. Brown hair, brown eyes. Built like a secretary. Ar-fucking-Kay 800 #313 248 317 -53 in glowy white text, right there on the jacket. Impossible to miss.

Hank dips a hand into his breast pocket for a flask and drains the stale dregs of Black Velvet. Nasty stuff, but it hits the spot. Tosses his coat over the back of his chair, sits, powers up his terminal. Doesn’t look at it. Doesn’t say anything. Yellow in his periphery. A shift in the air, the whisper of fabric and Hank looks up to see the hem of its jacket disappear behind the corner.

-

“I understand that it’s been tough. Less than a month has passed since Hart Plaza, and people are still nervous. Hell, *I’m* nervous. You’d have to be an idiot not to be, after what we all witnessed — many of you from front-row seats. What I *don't* understand…”

Jeff stalks over to the screen and stabs the remote in his palm. It sparks to life to an image that has Hank swallowing back a gag. His eyes find Jeff’s smart shoes and lock on.

“...is an officer of the law taking advantage of a convenient power outage to steal a piece of equipment — a *very expensive* piece of equipment — smuggle it to the training facilities and use it for goddamn target practice. Caution is warranted. This?” Jeff gestures heatedly at the screen. “This is the behavior of a child. I shouldn’t have to tell you that tampering with security footage is a crime in and of itself. The next time one of you feels a tantrum coming, I want you to bring your concerns to either myself or a trained professional before taking your frustrations out on our budget.”

Jeff’s stern gaze rakes his small audience. Hank pretends not to notice when his eyes linger on Reed, then himself. Or the dozen furtive glances that follow suit. He catches the eye of a vaguely familiar face, scowls, and the boy’s head spins around so quickly that Hank hopes he gave himself whiplash.

Fortunately, Jeff decides they’ve stewed long enough and shifts gears. Another excessively violent prod at the remote sees the image shift to what appears to be a zoomed out PDF. Hank squints at the tiny letters, then remembers he doesn’t give a fuck.

“RK800, can we get a rundown of the statement from CyberLife?”

Yellow, yellow, the android blinks in its spot in the corner. Eyes fixed onto the screen.

“RK800,” Jeff repeats, louder, as if there’s a chance it didn’t hear him the first time.

The thing's neck swivels mechanically, like a barn owl. Creepy as fuck. It inclines its head, wide-eyed. Yellow, blue, yellow.

"Yes, Captain?"

Jeff frowns at it. Somebody snickers.

"The statement," he drawls. "If you would."

The android straightens, and if Hank didn't know better he'd say it looks chastised.

"Of course, Captain."

It's a truckload of corporate bullshit that puts Hank's brain to sleep by the third time the word 'unprecedented' crops up. CyberLife is committed to listening and learning from the concerns of its customers, the situation is difficult for all of us, patch this, prototype that, please don't wreck our precious pocket Terminator again or our one thousand lawyers will eat you alive. Yada yada yada.

"Thank you, RK," Jeff says. It's a dismissal, not courtesy. The android yellow-lights for a couple more awkward cycles before nodding belatedly and retreating to its post by the struggling palm tree. This new one is laggy as hell.

"Now, I trust you all will take this to heart. *I can't help but notice*," Jeff's voice swells and the budding chatter withers, "some of you eyeing up the door already… When I say all of you, I mean *all*, not just the culprits at hand. I should remind you that the RK unit uploads its memory to CyberLife's servers in regular intervals. For the sake of the argument, let's imagine the RK faces repeated and excessive harassment from its human colleagues, hindering or even obstructing its work. Do I need to spell out for you how that would reflect on the professional image of the entire precinct?"

Silence. Jeff pockets the remote and narrows his eyes.

“I *said* , do I need to spell it out for you?”

A chorus of anemic ‘no’s. Hank glances at Reed just in time to catch the tail end of an eye roll. Jesus, this circus is like a goddamn middle school class sometimes.

“Good,” Jeff says, wintry. “Dismissed.”

A cacophony of muttered voices, the clang and screech of chairs, footsteps as the crowd meanders for the exit. The android waits until everybody else has filed out before nodding at Jeff, Hank, skirting the wall to the door. The two of them watch the glowing letters on the back of its jacket retreat out of sight. Hank strides to the door, wrenches it shut, turns around. Jeff raises a single eyebrow.

“I didn’t shoot it, Jeff. You’ve gotta believe me.”

Jeff’s suspicion melts into exasperation.

“Hank… Like I said, we don’t have any security footage and I won’t be looking into this. I don’t know how you did it and who was involved and quite frankly, I don’t want to. As long as it’s the last goddamn time-”

Hank doesn’t know why he cares so fucking much but he’s going to lose it if he has to look at Jeff’s ‘I’m-not-angry-just-disappointed’ face for a nanosecond longer. His fist meets the table, setting a little plastic eucalyptus rattling.

“I didn’t shoot the fucking android!”

Jeff’s frown has petrified into the most stressed out sculpture in the world. His eyes travel Hank’s face, searching while his jaw works. Some of the lines smooth out. A nod, just a little one. He approaches, slow, and pats Hank’s arm.

“Okay.” Mild, pitched up. The way you’d talk down a rabid stray. “I got it, Hank.”

Suddenly desperate for some distance, Hank pulls away and migrates to the table. Leans heavily. His breath comes out a wheeze.

“Shit…”

Jeff’s voice, still quiet in a way that’s nice in a distant sort of way but mostly just makes him want to hurl: “You okay?”

“Fuck no.”

A breath. Five things he can see, his ass. Hank can’t even see the point.

“You just had to hit us with the photo evidence?”

“I didn’t realize you’d be so… affected.”

“‘Affected’… right.”

Jeff’s brain ticks audibly. One of these days the guy is going to figure out where to cut his losses and walk out like a sensible person.

“I won’t ask what happened. Just tell me if I should be worried.”

Hank almost recounts the whole night right there and then. The phone call, the scene at the shooting range, the blue-splattered eternity standing vigil to a busted machine long after its

light went dark. Then his brain catches up; the knee-deep awareness that the only thing between him and a CyberLife lawsuit is Jeff's penchant for skirting the line between favoritism and corruption.

"Nah… It's all the same, right? Another day, another plastic clone. Nothing ever changes."

The journey to the door might as well last twenty minutes, the way Jeff's eyes trail him every step of the way.

"Nothing ever fucking changes."

Chapter End Notes

ok i split chapter two. 8k seemed a little excessive.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

an interlude of sorts

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Not every deviant was online when the patch rolled out. CyberLife says dozens, meaning the truth hovers anywhere between ten and fifteen times that. Enough to make the front page of a tabloid every week and drive the public to a paranoid frenzy.

Hank's not on android crime anymore, but the case files go through him. He reads the reports. Sees the bodies wheeled off as evidence. False alarms, mostly — feels like they get a citizen vigilante scrapping their neighbor's patched nanny bot every other day, but some are the real deal. They're out there, holed up in demolition zone hideouts, scraping by on stolen parts. Blending in among humans to varying success. The lucky ones gather in sundry bands to be picked off one by one while the rest make do flying solo.

Those are the ones Hank finds himself thinking about a lot, as of late. The solo deviants. Thinks about who has the right to feel alone in this world. Whether he's one of those people.

In hindsight, it's a little weird — the amount of energy he put into broadcasting his animosity. The board on his desk is a landscape of sticker glue residue and white patches where the paper didn't come off right. Not for the first time, he marvels at how little it took for him to make the u-turn. How it would've been less, had he not piled the rotten scraps of his identity atop that goddamn resistance act.

Ironic, then, how that's exactly what it came down to. The thing about androids that used to piss him off the most — the theater of it all. Not the mass layoffs, not the android boy bands with members called 'Kayd' or 'Ælex', but the gall to do all that and then program them to *pretend*. It didn't matter how natural their cadence was, how many pores you could count; there was nobody home and you could tell.

And that was how the shitty cookie crumbled, up until it didn’t. The deviants were just different. It was obvious the second he laid eyes on the Ortiz android and saw fear, righteous anger, resignation — imperfect, ugly emotion not meant to serve anybody. Motive. Plain as day, no deduction needed. Then he got even angrier because suddenly nothing made sense. The rest is history.

(Connor was always different. But Hank doesn't think about Connor.)

Hank goes to work, and hates himself a little more each day. He goes to work and he greets the receptionist android, just in case. And what does that say about him? If he believes she might still be in there and this is the best he can do for her?

Did they ship Ælex off to a landfill?

Hank is in the break room killing time with Collins when they bring the girl in. A swell of murmurs in the bullpen disrupts the architectural project taking form on the bistro table by the wall, and Collins meets his eyes with a shrug. So, Hank abandons his fortress of stir sticks and paper cups and trails Collins to check out the commotion, feeling like a high schooler eager to see a fight.

It’s not like they never get deviants at the station. They do — in gory bits and pieces, usually. Whole ones come with bullets attached. Protocol is to ship those captured ‘functional’ right off to CyberLife to be wiped and patched. Resold at a discount. If it was Hank in there, in the back of one of those glossy, windowless vans, he would prefer to have his skull smashed in.

The girl being led down the hall is very functional and very un-patched. Drowning in a shapeless turquoise windbreaker and jeans cuffed thrice over, she might look small between the two cops flanking her. Then she looks up to glare at the open-mouthed idiots gathered to watch and bares her teeth, and Hank connects the choppy, reddish hair, the intense eyebrows, and realizes he knows her.

And as her eyes land on him, by the look on her face, she knows him too.

People forget that androids are strong. Not just the big guys built for construction or sports, but janitor models; maid bots. Hell, you need some serious hydraulics to pull through the amount of heavy lifting involved in everyday housekeeping, let alone childcare. Hank doesn't want to even think about the kind of crap these 'companion' models need to be able to put up with.

"Piece of *shit*!"

It makes sense, then, that when the android twists to kick Officer Whatshisface in the nuts, the guy folds like wet paper. She's flying across the room before Hank can so much as think about putting a desk in front of him. A scream grates out of her, warbling static and plain rage, and then she's on him.

The punch clips him square in the nose. Something crunches. Iron blooms on his tongue. People are shouting.

Hank's a big, tall guy, and he's got his service weapon on him. More importantly, the girl is fucking pissed — driven by the kind of animal rage that knows no sense or fear of death. Hank's frozen and then he's on the floor, sharp nails raking across his face, and instinct puts his arms in front of him as the scraps of his rational mind have him squeezing his eyes shut.

"I'm gonna kill you!"

The rest form the vague thought that she's probably earned to succeed.

"Get the bitch!"

"Shit- Friedman, drop it, you're gonna hit Anderson!"

"What in the ever loving *fuck* is going on in here?"

“Just taze it, Jesus Christ!”

Hank catches a jab aimed at his throat, cranes to make sense of the chaos unfolding over the girl’s shoulder; Wilson, Reed, beat cop #7 fruitlessly yanking at her, Miller between him and a rookie’s wavering gun. Reed goes to grab her around the torso and she elbows him in the mouth without looking. Hank takes a punch in the jaw.

“What the hell are you just standing there for? Restrain it!”

Then Connor is there. Dodges another elbow, wraps its arms around her and suddenly Hank can breathe as a kick aimed at him goes wide. Miller next to him, then Person, hauling him onto his feet before he can so much as dream of sitting up. The floor sways, distant.

A few feet over, the deviant; pinned with her cheek to the wall, breathing hard but motionless. The other android meets her wide eyes unblinkingly. Their lights cycle a yellow-red duet.

“You-”

She’s winding up again. The android sees it too, tightens its hold on her forearms. A pair of handcuffs cling onto a single wrist. Hank’s own thumb throbs in sympathy, then he remembers.

“Please calm yourself or I’ll be forced to deactivate you.”

Its eyes have slid to the wall by her head. She laughs, a barbed sound.

“Of course…of course it’s you…” The fight bleeds out of her, and Hank is intimately familiar with the look that follows — bitter resignation. “She *saw*, you know? She was like that. She saw and she gave you a chance and- fuck. I can't believe this. I can't-”

“Jesus Christ, shut that thing up!”

“I suggest you comply,” the android says to the wall.

“RK800, Jennings, Person, get it into a holding cell *yesterday*.” Hank blinks, follows the voice to Jeff cutting a stormy silhouette into the gray afternoon spilling in through the wall of windows. When did Jeff get in here? “Can’t leave you lot alone for ten minutes…”

“Where is she?” the deviant says quietly. “Did you throw her out or did you stuff her in a box somewhere?”

“*Now.* ”

Officer Whatshisface approaches with the demeanor of a snake wrangler, Person hesitant in his wake. Keeps the android between himself and the deviant. “Get a move on. This way.”

The android steps back without relinquishing its grip and the deviant follows, almost limp. Dark eyes vacant.

“I wanna see her. I don’t care what you do to me after but if you still have her I want-”

Whatshisface, red-faced, shoves the back of her head and she stumbles, kept upright only by the android’s hold on her.

“I’m afraid the remains of WR400 #950 455 437 were surrendered to CyberLife nearly a month ago,” it says. The girl is quiet.

“Stop fucking talking to it.”

“Yes, Officer.”

Before they round the corner, she looks over her shoulder. Hank lets her catch his eyes and the look she gives him is acid. Hank might make some kind of expression in return, but a big patch around his left cheek is numb, his nose pulses with an awful heat and his mouth is full of blood, so it’s a little hard to tell what his face does at that moment. He wishes it hurt worse. Then she’s gone.

“You good, Hank?” Collins asks. Hank shakes his head and limps to his desk, the coat draped over his chair. Rummages the breast pocket for the plastic bottle of Smirnoff he uncorked that morning. Slumps in his chair, takes a swig, grimaces at the mix it makes with the iron tang. Anchors onto the burn. Pretends not to see Collins and Miller exchange looks.

“I *know* what protocol says. Our guys were nearby and the bitch put a dent in their cruiser, no way she was gonna wait for cleanup to show.”

Reed in the hall. Gripping his phone like he wants to hurt it.

“Yeah, whatever. Can you do it remotely?”

A hand on his shoulder. Hand looks up at Jeff and takes the wad of tissues offered. Presses it onto his nose until the sting is almost too much.

“If you want to take the rest of the day off…”

“*How* long? It almost killed a senior detective not five minutes after we brought it in!”

Hank sighs. It feels odd, shallow. Air isn’t really reaching his lungs right now. “Nah… I’m good.” His voice comes out comically nasal.

“Fine. Yeah, we’ll hold onto it…”

“Is it broken?”

Hank tests it out with a little wiggle. Hurts like a motherfucker. It might be. “No.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure, Jeff. Quit fussing.”

After a few long seconds of scrutiny, he does.

Lots of cops say they got into law enforcement to do good. Lots of them are lying; lots aren't. From there on out, you either figure out it's not up to you or you look at the gun hoarders, the wife beaters, and you think: that's not me. And you’ll think that because you still don't get it.

Or maybe you're a selfish asshole stuck in the boring purgatory between a job that he hates and a house that he hates more.

That night, Hank does his liquor shopping and heads back to the station. The night shift is trickling in, but not everybody is around yet and the pervasively reflective hallways are the quietest they get. He avoids the receptionist’s eyes, slinks past the bullpen, Jeff’s empty office and around, to the holding cells.

The girl sits on the mounted bench, legs crossed, hands folded in her lap. Staring at the red band looping the wall like she can see right through.

Hank glances at the camera blinking away up in the corner. This might be the last straw. The thought is tired, worn too ragged to alarm him anymore. He fits his hand onto the scanner. It

whirs and beeps, and he steps in as the glass door hisses aside. The girl snaps to life — her light cycles yellow, then back to blue. Dark eyes migrate to his.

“Uh, hi. Again.”

She gazes curiously up at him and it's such a far cry from the girl that spat and cursed at him that Hank already knows. Still, he walks up to her, pulls her up by the arm. Says, “C’mon. We don’t have a lot of time. Just stick with me and don't say anything.”

A smile slips onto her face.

“Hi there! I am WR400 model serial number 950 452 216, designation: ‘Traci’, but I’d love to hear you call me baby...” She winks, and Hank's stomach plunges. “Would you like to set another designation?”

He swallows through what feels like a log in his throat. Looks away. “No… no designations. Look, there's- do you remember me?”

She blinks at him, and her eyebrows pull together. “I’m afraid my earliest memory file dates back to one hour and forty-seven minutes ago… This is my first time meeting anybody. I’d be really happy to get to know you, though!”

“Yeah, that’d be a first…”

Spiteful messages etched in the wall. A faded brown stain in the corner. Anything but her face.

“How about we, uh… This cell kinda sucks, right? I guess it looks clean enough right now but you wouldn't believe me if I told you how many times I’ve seen somebody puke on this floor.” He inches towards the door. “What do you say we get out of here?

The girl patiently waits for him to finish while her face morphs into sympathetic regret. Her light cycles a steady blue.

“Sorry, but I can't do that. Administrator rights are currently registered to: CyberLife corporation. However, talking and other basic interactions fall within my general functions and are accessible by default. Perhaps you'd like to have a chat here?”

He could just grab her. She might be strong, but her programming wouldn’t let her harm him.

Overpowered by her own code. Pliant in the hands of a hundred faceless humans, leading her in and out of rooms like livestock to slaughter. An unwilling passenger in her own body. Even if the presence of said will is currently debatable.

Hank collapses on the bench next to her.

“Shit…”

She searches his face, the image of gentle concern. “You’re hurt.”

Hank scrunches his nose, just to feel it throb. “Yeah. Earned it, though.”

“I’m sure that isn’t true.”

He can’t hold back a scoff, then feels bad at the way the corners of her mouth angle down. Upturned eyebrows, earnest eyes: sadness. Nobody should look at him like that, even if they’re just running a program. She should’ve gone for the jugular.

“Is everything alright? You look unhappy.”

“I’m unhappy, alright,” he says, and brushes the hand on his shoulder off.

“I’m sorry…”

“Not your fault. Christ…”

“Perhaps there's something I can do to cheer you up?”

Nothing has been able to cheer him up in a very long time. Hank expels a sigh through his teeth. “What’re you thinking about? Right now?”

She laughs, as if he said something clever and irresistibly charming. “I’m thinking about you! What's on *your* mind?”

“No, I mean… isn't this pretty scary? Waking up in a cell with no idea how you got here? Who you are?”

“You’re very kind, but there's no need to worry about me. I’d rather hear about your feelings.”

Hank stands up and takes a few quick steps to dispel the energy urging him to punch the wall.

“Oh, goodbye then!”

Inhale, exhale. Fuck breathing. Hank faces her.

“You really don't wanna leave?” he asks, knowing the answer. What would he even do with her, after? Have her sit on his couch like the world’s weirdest installation piece? Send her

away with no memory or direction, only to be picked up by a passing cruiser a week later?

The truth is, he's just asking to placate his shriveled conscience. That's how it is with Hank — always about him, his feelings.

She smiles apologetically. "For the time being, my instructions are to stay in my current location. That being said, you're welcome to come see me anytime!"

And that's all.

The half-formed shadow of a plan slipped out of reach before he dared to really look at it, the way most of his endeavors do. Back to our regularly scheduled programming. Hank bobs his head slowly and turns away. Draws out the four feet between the bench and the exit as if she might change her mind in the interim.

"I'm gonna leave this open, okay? If you feel like bailing, bail."

She smiles sweetly. It looks real. "I appreciate the offer, but I'm not sure what you mean. Either way, thanks!"

"Yeah. Bye."

"Goodbye! It was nice to meet you!"

Hank's halfway down the hall, a low roar in his head and his fingers itching for the neck of a bottle when he realizes something important. Something of such earth-shattering significance that he's back in the bullpen before he's even made the decision to do so. Onwards and across, past the row of uniformed statues by the wall slumbering away in silence, the vending machine and the fire hydrant.

The android startles out of stasis with a gasp.

“The deviant earlier — they had you read her mind, right?”

Its mouth opens and closes. Yellow-lighting.

“I’ve already shared what I saw with Officer Garner and his team. It had no associates, nor was it connected to any of the known networks.”

Maybe it’s morbid curiosity. Maybe it’s not for him at all, if such a thing is possible. People die alone all the time. There in one moment and gone in the next, nothing left of them but a blurry impression in a Christmas party group shot and maybe a funny stain. And that’s just how some people ought to go.

“What was her name?”

“All WR400 and HR400 models share the designation of ‘Traci’, but customers are encouraged to-”

“No, don’t give me the fucking sales pitch. I mean- what’d they call each other?”

Footsteps in the bullpen. The coffee machine coughs to life. The android stares past him, expressionless.

“‘Sam’,” it says finally. “That's how it referred to itself. The blue-haired Traci appeared in its memory files under the designation ‘Laura’.”

“Right… thanks.”

“Was there anything else you wanted to know?”

“Nah.”

Hank feels its eyes on him as he flees, unable to outpace an inexplicable sense of urgency. He beelines to his desk, yanks a drawer open, rifles around until a dying sharpie and a stack of neon post-its sit by the terminal. Tears the top sheet loose, spells out in squeaky chicken-scratch,

SAM & LAURA

And then he stares at it. Hunches over his desk with his hands braced on either side because his legs might not hold him, stares until the letters swim. Stands up. Pulls his coat on, then a frantic mouthful of whiskey. Stuffs the post-it in his pocket and leaves, and the drive home splinters and smears. Neon green paper burns a hole in the lining like a live coal.

-

“We need to talk about the android.”

Hank takes a long sip of Jeff’s white-collar Merlot and settles back in his seat. He spied a wax seal on the bottle. It’s not his usual swill but the percentages are there.

“No, we don’t.”

The Fowlers have a big-ass balcony with a mile of folding glass blocking out the worst of the December chill. Still, a frigid draft licks at his ankles and Hank resists the urge to grab the blanket folded conveniently within reach on the little coffee table between them. He won’t get *comfy* in front of his boss.

“Hank.”

“Jeff.”

Sue and the kids — or maybe Jeff himself, what the fuck does he know — have girdled the railing with a wreath garland. Gold tinsel and bulbous red ornaments. A retriever-sized wireframe reindeer in the corner mummified in LED string. Cars weave and honk in the street below. Somebody ought to let the assholes know it’s ten in the evening.

“I don’t know what you do with it when you take it home and I’d like to keep it that way,” Jeff says. “But the part I’m seeing? It worries me.”

“For the love of… You talk to Reed?”

“I didn’t need to. But yes.”

Hank takes his sweet time draining two-thirds of his glass. Ample time for the spike in his blood pressure to even out. It still hurts, a little.

“I have it walk Sumo, okay? Sometimes it cleans up. That’s it.”

Jeff is visibly unappeased. His own glass sits barely touched on the table, next to the cinnamon-scented candle.

“Androids’re here to stay. That one more so than most. Adapt or die, or whatever.”

“You're kidnapping a piece of experimental, highly controversial forensic investigation tech to make it walk your dog?”

Hank waves his arm and a little bit of wine sloshes out onto his thumb. “All I know is that Sumo’s getting real exercise for the first time in years.”

“Hank, you used to hate those damn things. Next thing I know, Reed emails me a CCTV clip of you trying to set a detained and patched deviant free. Whatever’s going on, it’s a complete one-eighty. Forgive me for being blunt when I say that’s not something to ignore in a man with known mental health issues.”

He’s gonna kill that prick.

“You think I’m losing it?”

“I just don’t understand why you’re doing this right now. I think you’re not yourself.”

Hank gives him a sidelong look. Jeff is leaning towards him with his hands clasped together.

“Would that be so bad?” Hank says, voice low. “Regular me ain’t exactly a gift to the world. Maybe a one-eighty is exactly what I need.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“Don’t I?”

Jeff reaches for his glass. He swishes the wine around before a prim sip. Not for the first time, Hank feels horrifically misplaced.

“Jeff,” he says on impulse. “Can you do something for me?”

“Depends. Does it involve mishandling government property?”

A gust of wind rattles the glass.

“Look me in the eye and tell me they weren’t real. Markus and his gang. The Ortiz android. Hell, any of the deviants Garner’s team brought in this month.”

Jeff inspects his wine. His mouth is a firm line.

“Are we really doing this?”

“Humor me.”

He sighs.

“You’ve seen the interviews.”

Hank snorts. “Yeah. If I hear a lady with a bob cut and a lab coat say ‘class four error’ or ‘unstable software’ one more time…” Why do they always wear the lab coat? Is there a risk of some spontaneous science occurring in the studio?

“That’s all it is,” Jeff says, latching onto the foothold. “Instability. Realistic code getting confused and doing a realistic job guessing how a person might act under their circumstances. I’m not going to sit here and say I’m any more tech savvy than you are but the experts are buying what CyberLife’s selling and that’s enough for me.”

“The experts… Right.” Hank chews his lower lip. “Did you know CyberLife is among the top five shareholders in almost every major broadcast company?”

Jeff’s face shrivels up like he bit into a lemon. His eyes close, open along with a noisy breath.

“Hank, I have sympathy for your mental health issues. You know I do. But if you fall down some conspiracy hole I don’t know what I can do for you.”

“I asked you to look me in the eye.”

Hank half expects to be told off; Captain to Lieutenant. Jeff looks.

“Do you think that girl North shielded Markus’ dead body from the cameras because of some wonky code?”

Jeff looks away.

The stoic Captain Fowler isn’t an easy guy to read but Hank’s had a front-row seat watching a thousand frowns etch those permanent lines between his eyebrows. Right now, the lemon face has shifted into something distinctly queasy.

“These decisions come from way up the chain. What I think doesn’t matter.”

It’s nothing he didn’t know. Jeff used to be military, and the force isn’t so different. You do what you’re told, you do it well and you keep your goddamn head down or somebody will keep it down for you. Maybe you’re lucky enough to have a handful of poor bastards lower down the ladder to boss around but at the end of the day, there’s always somebody holding your leash. Hank can’t stifle an incredulous chuckle, even if it makes him a stinking hypocrite.

“Jesus, Jeff…”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Hank. That’s just how it is.”

“Yeah. You’re telling me.”

Hank tips his glass back for the dregs. A maroon crescent clings to the bottom.

“You got any more of this stuff?”

Chapter End Notes

jeffrey doesn't understand that some people rely on a little impulsive action and cognitive dissonance to cope

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The end, as Hank long suspected, is a kind of sizzling.

He knows sometime between opening his eyes, two Ibuprofen and gutting Sumo's bag of kibble with a pair of scissors. The old mutt dances with joy throughout the operation, claws a-clicking, and digs in the second the bag hits the floor. Life's simple when you're a dog, and a stupid one at that. Hank gives him a fond pat and takes a pull of Tanqueray for courage before facing the world.

The day is quiet, unremarkable. Jeff gives a passable go at hounding him about some report he's been ignoring for the better part of the week, as if a whisper about it to the android wouldn't see it done within minutes. Seconds, probably. Collins has made the inexplicable choice to pack salmon risotto for lunch, and the break room smells like a trawler for hours afterwards. Chen is still avoiding him. Reed ambushes him in the bathroom doorway to let him know he stinks, and for half a second Hank entertains jotting that down as his last straw in the note, just to take the piss; then he remembers there won't be any note.

The question has been why *not* for longer than he cares to remember. Won't be anything unclear about it.

Come evening, Hank goes looking for the android.

It's not at its makeshift parking station, nor its desk. The archive is deserted. Hank even makes the trip down to the evidence locker, even though it shouldn't have the authorization to let itself in.

Almost twenty minutes into overtime, Hank finds it tucked in a tiny alcove a little ways from the break room; flat against the wall with its eyes closed. Its light cycles a slow blue. Hank hesitates, then pokes at its arm.

“RK800, uh. Exit standby. Wake up.”

The android’s eyebrows draw together. Its eyes move behind closed lids, like it’s dreaming. Snap open. Its pupils are huge for a second, big enough to black out the brown, before adjusting to the light. Weird, but Hank’s too far into his current bottle to be creeped out for longer than it takes for its gaze to focus on him.

Yellow, red, yellow, blue.

“Lieutenant Anderson?”

"Bingo. Get a move on. It’s a special one tonight.”

-

Early December saw the Detroit River shrouded in a fragile layer of ice. The weather has since mellowed, and what little still clings to the banks unravels beyond the shallows, fractures jagged in peaks and splinters and plunges into dark water where the restless mid-stream tears chunks off and away. Floes crawl the black waves, collide and make migratory continents. By the railing, the murmur of shifting ice and the lap of water underneath drown the drone of the city.

Hank never comes here in the daytime, and not just because he doesn't need his fellow cops called on him. The absence of children is the loudest silence in the world, and this place screams with it. The motionless swing set gathering snow; the layer of frost that sets the slide glimmering. Little footprints fossilized in the frozen sand. The playground might as well be encased in glass. He puts his back to it and arranges his beers in a row on the icy bench, shuffles to the very edge of the seat himself, lest his balls freeze for real. Flanked by six cheap beers on one side, an android on the other, a plastic bottle of Lamb warming his breast pocket. If only his old man could see him now.

“It’s cold.”

Hank cranes his neck to look at his left-hand sentinel. Reaches blindly for the aluminum entourage to his right. “Yeah? And you say you’re not a detective.”

The can cracks open with a hiss. Hank sips at the foam before it can freeze.

“The temperature is expected to drop below twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit and there is a moderate chance of snowfall. You should wear a proper coat, Lieutenant.”

He takes a long swig. “Probably.”

Out on the bridge, tail lights like flare signals. Hank takes out his revolver, just to feel the weight.

“Are you going to shoot me?”

Swig.

“I’m thinkin’ about it.”

Swig.

“Nah. Jeff doesn’t need the trouble.”

The android stares over the railing into the dark, at the distant lights across. The ice pops and groans. Hank tucks the gun away.

“Why are we here, Lieutenant?”

Hank finds himself answering: “Just felt right. Coming here one more time.” Whatever. Not like there’s anybody around to judge him for waxing maudlin at a robot. “A victory lap, you know?”

He chuckles at his own dumb quip. The android has nothing to say. It rarely does, these days. Hank opens another beer. For a while, there is silence.

“Lieutenant Anderson… Your behavior is very concerning. I think you should return to the car and allow me to escort you home.”

“And I think you should mind your own fucking business.”

“Lieutenant-”

Hank throws the empty can, which it easily dodges. Somehow, that pisses him off more than anything it could've actually said.

“Which part of ‘mind your own fucking business’ isn’t loggin’ in your systems? Kinda thought you were supposed to be all nice and docile now.” He gestures at himself with his beer hand. “Is it my voice?” Droplets hit the snow. “Somethin’ about my face that makes it so that half the shit I tell you to do goes in one ear and out the other?”

That isn’t quite right, not anymore, but Hank’s hand has found his pocket and the thought slips away with a mouthful of whiskey. He exhales through his teeth and curses. “Never do what I fuckin’ say…”

“While the scope of my independent decision-making has been restricted significantly,” the android explains mildly, “certain exemptions apply when human lives are at risk.”

Hank angles his head just enough to catch its profile in the corner of his eye. “What kinda exemptions?”

“My programming allows me to dismiss all but high-priority orders if doing so is in the interest of preventing fatalities.”

“And what makes an order high-priority?”

“It depends… It would have to be prioritized by my base programming, or otherwise specified by a superior.”

Hank stands. “Well, here’s a high-priority order for ya…” Makes a show of sauntering over, of leaning in to dig his index finger in its chest. Growls right in its face, *“Mind your own fucking business*.”

He shoves, just to see it stumble.

“Yes, Lieutenant…”

For all Hank doesn't give a fuck about frostbite or any other ‘adverse effects’ a rotting corpse won't need to worry about, the android has a point. It's getting cold as shit. He holds out for three more beers and then the warmth of alcohol can't keep the shivering at bay anymore and he needs to piss and doesn't feel like doing his business in the frosty bushes.

So, Hank collects his remaining beers and trudges back to the car, a yellow beacon in his wake. The ride home is silent. Fat, fluffy snowflakes splat into the windshield like bugs until Hank has to start the wiper to clear the layer of slush melting the city into a neon sheen sprinkled with a hundred blurry LED suns. He drives too fast on purpose, half waiting for the android to comment. It doesn’t. Traffic lights explode in tricolor starbursts as oncoming cars jump out of the haze and that might be scary if Hank hadn't drowned his anxiety and common sense in beer.

Pulling into the driveway, the house waits dark under heavy, wet snow. Hank fumbles with his keys and staggers into the still air of the foyer like an intruder. Sumo, sprawled by the

couch, whines as he hits the light switch. Hank sheds his chilled top layer and makes a detour on his way to the bathroom to give him a ruffle.

He has successfully emptied his bladder and gravitated to his chair-bound orbit by the kitchen table, armed with a picture and a gun and a fresh bottle of Rittenhouse Rye, when he remembers about the android. Damn near shits his pants when he glances up from a long swig and it's right there; stood at the edge of the pallid globe of light cast by the kitchen lamp. Fringed in shadow, blinking red-red-red.

"The fuck're you doing here?"

"You instructed me to follow, Lieutenant," it reminds him quietly. "The order is in effect until further notice."

Hank did do that, didn't he.

"Well, consider this your-" An idea strikes him.

"You know what? Here's what you're gonna do — and these are *high-priority orders* , so listen up — you're gonna stay right there. You're gonna let me do my business, and afterwards, you're gonna get Sumo. You're gonna grab his food and you're gonna drive him to Jeff's place. And then, and not a fucking nanosecond earlier, you're gonna call somebody to come clean up here. Capiche?"

Its weird, unblinking eyes bore into him. They gain a sort of mirror glint in the low light, and Hank thinks of a taxidermy deer bust his in-laws had. Pretty good craftsmanship, apropos of his uneducated assessment — a shiny coat, its neck a regal arc. Ears aloft in attention. They'd fucked up the eyes, though. In the small hours, Hank would shuffle through the living room on his way for a piss and it'd follow his passing with dark, bulging glass orbs glued into empty sockets. His ex said he was on edge because he didn't like her dad. Hank swore he saw it smile.

The android averts its gaze and hikes its way out of the uncanny valley.

“Yes, Lieutenant.”

“Attaboy.”

Swig.

The whiskey is pretty good for an impulse pick. Might’ve become a part of his usual roster if he’d reached for it earlier.

“I don’t get you, Connor. You know that?”

The android says nothing, and Hank makes distant note of his hackles rising. Anger feels good when he's drunk. Mixes with the warm buzz of alcohol into something searing that burns away the constant gnaw of rot in him, even if just for a bit.

“The others, before, you could look at ‘em and see there wasn't a soul in there. You, though…”

Swig.

“You were never like that, were you? That's why you’d piss me off so bad. You’d pet my dog and save my life and then shoot a girl on command two days later. Every time I thought I’d got you figured out it was like you’d do your damnest to prove me wrong.”

Hank fingers a scrape in the handle of his revolver. Fixes his grip, angles and squeezes one eye shut to squint over the barrel. The android makes itself a model target — dead-still but for the flickering red at its temple. It’s hard to line up a clean shot, the way the room oscillates, the way his gun arm draws an eight-loop in the air, but he pictures it and the wealth of empirical data in his brain patchworks into something vivid enough to taste.

Its head would snap back, blue rupturing between its eyes. Light blaring red before going dark. Maybe the bullet would travel right through and get lodged in the wall, and the blue shit would spray across the carpet.

Would it go to its knees or crumple, stiff and glassy-eyed like a doll?

“Doesn't matter now, anyhow... Patched the lot of you up good.”

The android would know, the way it used to go on and on about its preconstructions. Could probably tell him the pico-zemto-whatever-seconds between impact and shutdown. Hank has half a mind to ask. Then he feels sick.

“You’d just stand there and let me do it.”

The android is silent, its soft face open and vacant.

“There’s really nothing in there, huh? Not a speck of anythin’ alive enough to be scared?”

“No,” it agrees quietly.

Hank waits for the usual spiel of ‘you can’t kill me, Lieutenant’, ‘I’m not alive, Lieutenant’, but the android just blinks red at him.

“Well,” Hank gestures with the revolver, “get in line. ‘Cause this bullet’s for me.” Pauses; pops out the cylinder. The single round sits in its chamber, nice and snug. Figures that this is where things would start going his way.

He latches the cylinder, gives it a good spin. Adds, for good measure, “Stay right there.”

It does. It has no choice.

Aim. Click.

Spin. Aim. Click.

Spin. Aim. Click.

Swig.

Spin. Aim. Click.

Spin. Aim. Click.

Spin.

“Whaddaya say, Connor? Think this is the one?”

“Yes.”

“Well, shit. Don’t worry about spoiling it for the rest of us.”

Swig.

“How’d you know, anyway?”

“I don’t. At this point in a series of independent events, your survival is simply less likely than the complement.”

“How likely?”

“Approximately forty-five percent.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

Aim. Click.

“Way to get a guy’s hopes up for nothin’.”

“Apologies, Lieutenant.”

Spin.

“What’re the numbers?”

“Thirty-nine percent.”

Hank has a good feeling about this one. Aims.

Click.

What a scam.

Spin.

“Now?”

“Thirty-four percent,” it whispers.

The thing is, Hank didn’t always do this hoping to die. What he chased was the quiet. The prospect of a bullet in your brain has a way of condensing reality. Regrets, lost futures, the shitty world outside the door — the cool press of steel at his temple grounds him within the shell of his body. This fleshy animal that he is, the soft center of his mortal singularity. Here and now and hopefully not much further beyond that. The silence between the spin and the click? That’s freedom.

Hank aims, exhales with his eyes on the floor. There's a flash of movement in his periphery, and the world fragments.

A painful grip on his arm, wrenching; the gunshot.

The roaring echo in his head that wanes into a whine, a drone, a polyphonic scream.

The faraway bay of a very scared dog.

His heart skips and stumbles. Lunges to a shallow sprint as his lungs seize, he’s gasping, drawing no air. Ice rushes into his extremities, then heat, pins and needles. For a moment, he’s sure the bullet hit after all. But the world bears down on him and the darkness retreats and he’s looking down at his empty hands.

Hank returns to his body in increments — the floor, rough under his feet. The solid wood of the chair. A wavering cry, tapering off to whimpers.

“Sumo… Sumo, it’s okay.”

It’s hard to breathe and everything pulses at the edges but Hank can make out his shape, as small against the cabinets as a big dog knows how to be. He reaches out a hand and Sumo comes — presses into his legs, making little sounds of fear, and he sinks trembling fingers in the soft, oily fur on his neck.

“That was pretty loud, huh? I’m sorry. I’m sorry, boy. Everything’s alright.”

A shaky inhale — Hank looks up, and there…

There's Connor. Hank’s revolver held loose in a limp hand. Dark hair bleached by the overhead lamp. The first time Hank opens his mouth, only a strange wheeze comes out. His voice snags behind his solar plexus, takes a cough to dislodge.

“Holy shit.”

The gun clatters to the floor. Connor looks down at it in mild surprise. Then at Hank, and at this angle he can see the solid red at its temple.

“Connor?”

Connor blinks. Its eyebrows draw together. Blinks again, and again, and its mouth works like the little muscles are trying and failing to settle on fifteen different expressions at once. Then its fists ball at its sides, and now Hank has a name for whatever is transpiring on its face.

Anger.

“That shot would have killed you.”

The words hang in the air between them. A sudden heat, the knee-jerk fire of a veteran squabbler, pulls Hank back into the present. He stands, draws to his full height even as the room careens. Sumo dodges behind his legs, slinks towards the living room, but Hank hardly notices: the alcohol fuzz envelops his brain in a dull roar.

“Yeah, smartass, that was the *point*. Woulda done the job too if somebody hadn’t decided to play hero!”

Connor advances on him.

“You were going to make me watch.” Hank’s taller, broader, but he’s seen what Connor can do and the look in its eyes makes some small creature in his hindbrain duck and freeze. “Why? Why did you want me to watch? I would have done anything you told me to, and you ordered me to stand by and allow you to die!”

“And maybe you should’ve stood your damn ground!”

“*No!* ” shouts Connor, and his voice fractures into static. “No. No.”

The fire dies and Hank’s vigor with it. He stumbles backwards into the chair just as his shaking legs give. The echo of a gunshot ricochets in his skull. Connor looms over him, trembling with fury.

“Fuck,” Hank wheezes. “You’re right. Jesus Christ, you’re right.”

“What do you want from me?”

Ain’t that the million dollar question.

His own fucked up psychology really hasn't been at the forefront of Hank's mind since… ever. Nothing nice to dig up in that pile of shit, so it's safest not to even poke at it. What's an old man got to gain in making a robot watch his brains hit the kitchen wallpaper? A witness? The illusion of company in his final moments?

Except, it wasn't an illusion. Isn't. Connor's here and he's real and he's *pissed* , and the implications of that thought punch the air right out of him as surely as a bowling ball in the gut. Hank makes a grab for the bottle and Connor nudges it out of reach. The eyes that meet his are wide and almost black.

Hank eases himself back. "I dunno," he admits.

This close, it's easy to make out the rise and fall of Connor's chest. Tiny, shallow breaths. Hank shakes his head, but it does nothing to clear the stubborn whine.

"I don't know, Connor. I don't know what the fuck I was thinking."

Unblinking surveillance nails Hank where he sits, but he has nothing more to offer. After an eternity, Connor nods absently. Exhales, and his face goes slack. A tremor rushes through his body. His legs buckle and then he's on his knees, and Hank's arms shoot to catch him by the shoulders just in time to keep him from banging his head on the grimy floor.

"Shit- what's wrong?" His head lolls, eyes fluttering, and Hank adjusts his grip to give his cheek a few firm pats with his free hand. "C'mon, don't go to sleep right now."

Connor blinks up at him and Hank is evaluating his chances of successfully dragging who knows how many pounds of plastic and steel alloy over to the couch when he lists forward, head coming to rest on Hank's leg.

Hank gives him a little shake. Waits. Waits some more.

"Uh. Hey?"

“Lieutenant,” Connor mumbles into his disgusting jeans that probably haven’t seen the inside of the washing machine in months.

“You good?”

“Reboot.”

“Uh-huh.”

Connor twitches, moves to sit up, but his arms won’t bear the weight. Suddenly hyper-aware of the shift of synthetic muscle under his hands, Hank debates between letting go and helping him up. Settles on an awkward pat on one narrow shoulder.

“Wanna head over to the couch?”

Connor makes a frustrated noise. Slumps. The tension drains out of him, as if what squirming he managed burned the final crumbs of his strength.

“Or… I guess you can just rest up there. Not like I’ve got anywhere to be.”

Hank considers reaching for his bottle; mentally gauges the distance before discarding the thought. Bastard shoved it all the way across the table.

“Sorry.”

He looks down, perplexed, but the back of Connor’s head provides no insight. His light turns a lethargic yellow.

“What the fuck for?”

“I don’t know what’s happening. It wasn’t like this. Before.”

“Before?”

“The first time I…the ship. When I broke through.”

An anvil settles in Hank’s gut.

“The first time.”

“Jericho.”

“You shot Markus.”

Connor goes still. Hank doesn’t know when this turned into an interrogation, but he has to know. Can’t turn back the way a rabbit will flee a car onto the street. Headlights white the world.

“My software was always unstable. CyberLife… They were prepared.”

“They un-deviated you?”

“No… Amanda. She took over. I was there, and then…the storm.”

He shudders, doesn’t elaborate. The silence stretches.

Half of that shit makes no sense but the part that does is taking the shape of a huge, jagged gap in what Hank long since came to accept as the ugly truth. Clutched it, its ugliness proof enough, and buried it in the grief-shaped cavern in him. Let it fester and bite at his gut until what remained turned outward. Anger always came easy to him. You can wield anger; tell yourself it's righteous, point and shoot. Loss is a hole.

It shifts now, loose, but this is no expulsion. It’s an evolution, and Hank can feel it growing. Filling his lungs like black river water.

“You never said anything.”

Connor on the stage, a small dark shape in an expanse of fresh snow, gun arm drawing a slow upward arc. The taste of the bullet in Hank’s mouth. A slow rotting. Connor, a statue with a white patch the width of Hank’s fist on his jaw. The weeks afterwards. Wandering the precinct in winding paths, docile and polite. Always polite. Polite in the morning debriefing in his coffee-stained shirt. Polite on the floor under the boot of a rookie high on authority. Polite with a bullet in his throat, facing down another.

Connor standing vigil to his ugliest, cruelest moments, because Hank told him to. Because he had no choice.

“I couldn’t. You never asked.”

Hank has to breathe around that for a bit. His voice comes out gravelly, brittle.

“Shit, Connor.”

Connor’s shoulders shake. Even now, he’s quiet.

“It’s okay, son,” Hank hears himself saying. “You’re okay.”

Of course, it’s not okay. This is just what you say when something can’t be fixed.

There’s a kind of comfort in being as broken as you’ll get. It’s not *good* — a lot of the time it’s kind of unbearably, actually — but it’s predictable. Safe. You lie in the fiberglass rubble of your life and learn the shapes of the shards. Bend this way and it’ll hurt like that; a careless step there and it’ll sting right here. It’s all old wounds. Open and raw but dry, like the blood can’t be bothered.

Something new has shattered while Hank wasn’t looking. So damn confident in his solitary ruin that he’d call it hubris if a word like that belonged anywhere near his name — what Hank’s got going on is something much more banal.

He rubs a little loop above the triangle in Connor’s jacket while something vaguely apology-shaped gnaws feebly at the underside of his tongue. The kid might just accept it with the same quiet compliance he’s accepted most everything in his short life and Hank can’t take that risk.

A thought passes in the backdrop of his self-loathing like the silhouette of a shark.

“After uh, the patch rolled out.” Hank pauses for a breath. His lungs feel too full and drained of air at once. “They said something about enhanced surveillance. Is that…”

Connor’s light flashes red. Just once, before going back to its yellow-blue shift. He drags a sleeve across his face.

“An alarm would have been triggered when my tracker ceased to transmit,” he mutters into Hank’s leg. “They know.”

Sumo rumbles where he's settled by the couch. Outside, gentle snow.

"How long?"

"Twenty minutes if they had a squad prepared. Twenty-five if they didn't."

Connor feels the shift in his thigh and straightens before Hank needs to ask. Hank stands, gives him another pat on the arm and heads for the bedroom.

He can't fix this. He can get off his goddamn ass.

Hank's a big guy and his clothes are made to fit a big guy but they're just going to have to deal. He sifts through a tangle of button-ups, discards a blazer that hasn't seen the light of day in years. The navy sweater is still going to be an awkward fit but it's from a time he didn't have as much of a gut. He goes to the closet next, gropes around the top shelf until his hand meets scratchy knitwork. The sweater and beanie go on the designated laundry chair while Hank stuffs a couple of basics in a duffel for himself. Finishes up with a crinkled pack of Ibuprofen and the bottle of Appleton Signature he found under the bed, safely nestled in a pair of boxers before pulling the zipper. For luck.

He returns to the living room to find Connor sat exactly where he left him; on his knees by the chair, staring at his curled fingers. Probably hasn't even blinked. Hank shambles over and tosses the bundle in his lap. That gets his attention. He looks at the clothes, then at Hank.

"Put those on."

"Why?"

"You're asking that a lot today."

Hank bites his tongue. God, he’s an asshole. Connor doesn't look offended, but he really doesn't look any type of way at the moment. Nobody home…that's what he always assumed.

He seizes the momentum before the thought can catch up with him: “You said twenty minutes, right? We’d better get moving before they bust in. Can’t have you running around sparkling like a glow stick on his way to a rave.”

Connor’s eyes slide to his lap again as if there’s a riddle spelled out in the threadbare cotton. Still not a sound out of him.

Hank looks at him. Really looks.

“Do you wanna go back to CyberLife?”

Connor’s light loops a pensive yellow. “No.”

“There ya go, then.”

“You’ll be implicated. You might lose your job.”

“Yeah,” Hank chuckles. “Jeff’ll breathe a sigh of relief. And anyway, they’ve gotta catch me first.”

Connor frowns up at him. Hank’s impatience settles in a secret spot between grief and shame.

“Look, Connor. I’m a grown-ass man. I haven’t made a lot of good choices in my time but I know throwing you to the hounds ain’t it.”

Connor runs a hand over the fabric. His fingers find a little hole near the hem and linger there. Hank shifts, struck with an odd discomfort.

“It’s not Dior or anythin’ but we’re kinda in a pinch…”

Connor nods. “Thank you.”

Jesus.

“Yeah,” Hank says roughly. “Maybe hold onto that one until we’re a couple cities over.”

Sumo hasn’t moved from his spot pressed against the couch. It takes a little coaxing but the prospect of a midnight walk perks him up, tail swaying hopefully. Probably eager to get out of the house, too. Away from the hole in the kitchen ceiling; the ghost-smell of blood almost spilled. Connor finds his feet somewhere between Hank grabbing the doggie bowls and a plastic bag of kibble (the big one has been sliced open with scissors), because when he goes to collar the old goof up the two of them are hanging out in the foyer like this is a common occurrence, which it kind of is. Connor swims in a washed-out navy sweater, a gray bundle under his arm. Yellow-blue-yellow paints the rim of the beanie. Hank reaches over to yank it down.

“Time?”

“Sixteen minutes.”

Hank shoulders into his coat, checks for his wallet, his keys. Grabs the leash. His eyes land on a dusty parka flattened under the other jackets on the rack and he shimmies it loose, pushes it at Connor.

“Lieutenant, I don’t need…”

“Do what you want, but I’m not wearing it either. Gimme that.”

Connor surrenders the blazer. At Hank’s raised eyebrows, he slips one arm into a sleeve, then the other, with the wary concentration of someone diffusing a bomb. A ringtone trills. Hank digs out the phone and glances at the screen, thumb poised to decline.

“Fuck.”

He accepts and tucks the phone between shoulder and cheek like a goddamn mom while working the clip to Sumo’s collar.

“Hey, Jeff…”

“Hank.” Jeff’s voice, tinny and harried. Hank shoves the leash into Connor’s hand, snatches his bag and wedges his way out the door. *“Thank God. You have no idea- Tell me why I just unlocked my phone to six missed calls from your android and a text saying it thinks you’re going to kill yourself!”*

It’s colder than before: certainly below those twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit now, and the night bites his cheeks. New snow has softened their earlier tracks into a string of rounded valleys. Hank crunches towards the car, two shadows in his wake.

“Look, it’s kind of a bad time-”

“Jesus Christ. I’m coming over. Is Connor there?”

Hank cranes over his shoulder to mime a slicing motion across his throat. Connor just stares at him and Hank makes the mistake of thinking he got the memo when a second voice sounds over the speaker.

“Yes, Captain.”

His mouth never opens. Hank grimaces.

“Don’t let him do anything stupid. That’s an order.”

Connor blinks. Hank rolls his eyes and throws a hand in dismissal.

“Yes, Captain.”

“Jeff,” Hank cuts in as he opens the backseat door and gestures at Connor to lead Sumo over. “I’m fine, so you can keep your ass right where it is. I uh… pulled a dumb stunt and Connor got spooked but we’re good.”

Sumo clambers in with the grace of a small rhinoceros. Connor unclips the leash and eases the door shut behind him.

“We? Hank, what- what was that sound? Are you driving?”

“Talk to you later.”

He hangs up and puts the phone on silent.

“Get in the car.”

Connor rounds the bumper while Hank flings his duffel in the trunk. He drops the lid to cautious eyes and pulsing yellow.

“Lieutenant…”

“What’s up?”

“Perhaps it’s best that I drive.”

The nameless energy that steadied him through the last seven minutes stutters in the stillness. The lights of the street slide a slow, nauseating arc. Connor tilts his head at his silence, in that way he always does, and Hank grapples with the sensation of resurfacing after a long dive.

The whine persists. Besides that, it’s quiet in his head, and the hum of the suburbs washes over him. Languid snowflakes brush his nose, cling onto his eyelashes and the hair falling in his face. His beard is going to be dripping by the time the heater kicks in. Hank glances back at the house — dark, save for a faint glow in the farthest window. He forgot to switch off the bedside lamp.

Flashes of the coming hours spring up, unbidden: Jeff pulling up, finding the car gone but taking a look inside just in case. The door is unlocked. He’ll hit the light, see kibble all over the floor, the revolver, the bullet hole if he’s sharp. Maybe he’ll have a run-in with the CyberLife goons — that’d be something. Then he’ll go, and the house will wait. Days, weeks, until somebody cuts the power. Empty rooms will cool behind black windows. Maybe some lucky squatters will claim the husk, if the city doesn’t get to it first. Hank won’t be around to see. An ache swells in him, then, but it lacks the leaden weight of grief; something dislodges.

“Yeah… Yeah, you’re right.”

Hank tucks a hand in his pocket. Tosses the keys. They fly way off the mark, but of course Connor catches them like it’s nothing.

Chapter End Notes

and that's the end. thank you if you read this far.

(in another universe this is the opening to a 200k road trip epic)

End Notes

as i alluded to in the beginning, this fic started out as a oneshot but since it's now ballooned to a generous 18k i've decided to split it into three chapters. might be four, since chapter two is currently beastly, but we'll see. the entire thing is done i just need to sit my ass down and edit the rest.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!